Writing Short Answers to Exam Questions

Cue Words and Key Words
Cue words—words that tell you HOW to answer the question (organization)
Key words—words that tell you WHAT you need to address (content)

1. Cue Words
- Analyze—separate into parts and discuss parts and their meanings
- Clarify—to make clear, one way is to define a key term and use examples to illustrate
- Classify—to arrange into groups on the basis of shared characteristics
- Compare and Contrast—show similarities and differences
- Criticize—give your opinion regarding good points and bad points
- Define—state precisely what something is and thereby differentiate it from something similar
- Describe—explain features to make clear an object, procedure, or event
- Discuss—consider as many elements as possible concerning an issue or event
- Evaluate—give your opinion about the importance of something
- Explain—make clear or intelligible something that needs to be understood or interpreted
- Illustrate—give examples of something
- Interpret—to explain the meaning of something
- Justify—show or prove something that is valid or correct
- Prove—present evidence that cannot be refuted logically
- Relate—show connections between two or more things
- Review—evaluate or summarize something
- Show—point out or demonstrate something
- Summarize—identify the major points of something
- Support—argue in favor of something

2. Key Words
- Key words tell you the information, topics and ideas that you are to write about.

3. Writing Effective Sentences
- Write your answers in full sentences—avoid bulleted lists, sentence fragments, comma splices or run-on sentences.
- Sentences should have:
  - A capital letter at the beginning
  - Punctuation at the end
  - A subject
  - A complete verb phrase
  - An independent core idea that can stand alone (an independent clause)
4. A Summary of Sentence Patterns

* indicates not a sentence; S=Subject; V=Verb

Conjunctions: and, but, so, or nor, for, yet

Transitions: in addition, furthermore, meanwhile, first, however, therefore, consequently, as a result, indeed, etc.

- *S+V S+V (run-on sentence) e.g. I drove to school today it was raining outside.
- *S+V, S+V (comma splice) e.g. I drove to school today, it was raining outside.
- *S+V, transition, S+V e.g. I rode my bike to school today, therefore, I don’t have my car on campus.
- S+V, S+V e.g. I drove to school today. It was raining outside.
- S+V; S+V e.g. I drove to school today; it was raining outside.
- S+V, conjunction S+V e.g. It was raining this morning, so I drove to school.
- S+V, transition, S+V e.g. I rode my bike to school today. Therefore, I don’t have my car on campus.
- S+V; transition, S+V e.g. I rode my bike to school today; therefore I don’t have my car on campus.

5. A List of Suggestions

- Practice preparing answers ahead of time.
- Read through the exam before deciding which questions to begin with.
- Check the distribution of points on the exam, so that you spend the appropriate amount of time on the questions.
- Don’t expect the instructor to make the connections. You need to explicitly make connections in your answer.
- The key points should be clearly stated and the focus of your answer.
- Do not write everything you know about the topic. Write only what the question is asking for. Don’t add excess information to “pad” your answer.
- Spend a minute planning your answer before you start writing.

Website that contains more information, exercises and other links:
http://www.uwlax.edu/Biology/communication/AnsweringEssayQuestions.htm#shortanswers